

# FOREWORD

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The National Conference on Women's Health, cosponsored by the Food and Drug Administration and the Public Health Service (PHS) Coordinating Committee on Women's Health Issues, was a milestone occasion for the PHS as well as for the public health community at large. Through this conference, which was held June 17-18, 1986, in Bethesda, MD, individuals representing the diversity of occupations and disciplines within the public health community came together to address the important health concerns confronting women today.

Within the past 30 years, the roles and socioeconomic conditions of women have changed substantively in such areas as employment, education, and professional opportunities. These changes, together with the shifting demographic profile of women within the United States, have combined to illuminate women's health needs and to heighten our awareness that these needs go beyond what we as a society have traditionally viewed as women's health issues.

The concern of the public health community for women's health has intensified significantly as we recognize that increased cigarette smoking, coupled with the lack of effective therapy, has catapulted lung cancer ahead of breast cancer as the most common cause of cancer death among American women. The increased stress accompanying the demanding responsibilities placed on women at home and at work has been a contributing factor to the higher rate of heart disease and the resulting mortality among women. With changing attitudes toward sexual behavior and the early maturation of females, we see the numbers of teenage pregnancies and births reaching crisis-level proportions, with resulting adverse impacts both on the teenagers in terms of their education, dependency, and equal opportunity later in life, and on their babies in terms of increased incidences of mortality and low birth weight. As women live longer, we recognize the need to better understand and respond to the complex problems of long-term nursing care, chronic disease management, and the impact of the caregiver role on women who provide home health care to aged family members. We need to seek more effective ways to prevent and treat such disabling conditions as osteoporosis, incontinence, alcoholism, and medication abuse.

Improving the status of women's health within the United States remains a shared responsibility among women and society and all its institutions. As an individual, a woman can take active and informed steps to improve her own health by adopting behaviors effective in preventing disease and promoting wellness. Meaningful communication with health care providers, informed and safe use of medications, good nutrition and balanced diets, and active participation in health education programs are some of the many measures that women can employ to assume a greater degree of personal responsibility for their health.

Women's health is a priority item highlighted in the FDA Action Plan Phase II. The Action Plan Phase II was approved by Otis R. Bowen, M.D., Secretary of Health and Human Services, and I am confident that his support of this program will greatly contribute to the achievement of good health for women.

Societal institutions can also share more fully the responsibility for improving the status of women's health by effecting needed changes in the health care system, by changing attitudes, and by breaking down stereotypes that create barriers to access to quality health care services and delivery, timely and understandable health care information, and needed support networks within the community. Encouraging research into the serious, debilitating disease conditions impacting on women, communicating the results of this research to the public health community, and developing educational messages and programs to assist women in preventing diseases and achieving good health are indeed essential roles that can be undertaken by both the public and private institutions within our society.

The National Conference on Women's Health focused national attention on many important women's health issues and provided a baseline of medical and scientific information on various aspects of these issues. The conference proceedings document the presentations made by the recognized experts participating in this event and contribute to the growing body of knowledge that has become available to the public health community on women's health.

While these proceedings constitute an important vehicle for communicating the information conveyed at the conference, we regard this publication as the primary means for achieving the ultimate goal of the conference—to provide a resource and a stimulus for the development of educational messages and programs within local communities. Achieving this goal will help to promote the public health benefits of scientific research through a heightened awareness of and ability to apply the disease prevention and health promotion principles necessary for sustained good health for women.

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